



## Charms and Omens of Storm in Maritime Tradition of Ireland

Fomin, M. (2011). Charms and Omens of Storm in Maritime Tradition of Ireland. In T. Mikhailova, J. Roper, A. Toporkov, & D. Nikolayev (Eds.), *Oral Charms in Structural and Comparative Light: Proceedings of the Conference of the International Society for Folk Narrative Research Committee on Charms, Charmers and Charming. 27-29 October 2011, Moscow* (pp. 100-119). PROBEL.

[Link to publication record in Ulster University Research Portal](#)

### Published in:

Oral Charms in Structural and Comparative Light: Proceedings of the Conference of the International Society for Folk Narrative Research Committee on Charms, Charmers and Charming. 27-29 October 2011, Moscow

### Publication Status:

Published (in print/issue): 22/10/2011

### Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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# **Oral Charms in Structural and Comparative Light**

Proceedings of the Conference of the International  
Society for Folk Narrative Research's (ISFNR)  
Committee on Charms, Charmers and Charming  
27–29<sup>th</sup> October 2011  
Moscow

Moscow 2011

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# **Заговорные тексты в структурном и сравнительном освещении**

Материалы конференции  
Комиссии по вербальной магии  
Международного общества по изучению  
фольклорных нарративов  
27–29 октября 2011 года  
Москва

Москва 2011

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**Charms, Omens, and Apparitions of Storms  
in Maritime Tradition of Ireland and Scotland**

**Introduction**

We shall start with defining ‘maritime memorate’ as a folklore genre intrinsic to the Gaelic-speaking communities of Ireland, employing Scottish material as an appropriate comparands, and will look at specific examples of memorates and contemporary legends that deal with such things as omens, portents and apparitions before the storm.<sup>1</sup>

**Memorates and contemporary legends**

In folklore studies, memorates are an under-studied area. Defined as personal accounts of supernatural happenings, memorates are centred around various phenomena of human life and constitute an extremely popular and productive folklore category. They include a variety of extraordinary maritime experiences and other accounts, which occur in liminal spatio-temporal contexts, such as the sea-shore, streams, fords and bridges. These stories typically involve encounters with ghosts and other beings, and portents of death symbolised in phantom boats.

The study of memorates was established at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> c. by Carl Wilhelm von Sydow (1948), who introduced the distinction between a memorate and a fabulate. Memorates in his view were a first-hand narrative describing a series of events, while a fabulate was a similar narrative heard second- or third-hand. Linda Dégh and Andrew Vászonyi (1974) postulate the existence of proto-memorates – memorates concealed behind a fabulate.

The dearth of research carried out in the area of memorates in Ireland is in inverse proportion to the exceptionally rich collections recorded there. Over the years, a good deal of attention has been paid to the traditional folklore categories of fairy legend, traditional tale and oral narrative by scholars re-

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<sup>1</sup> Our study is based on the tentative preliminary results of the project ‘Stories of the Sea: A Typological Study of Maritime Memorates in Modern Irish and Scottish Gaelic Folklore Traditions’ funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (ref. AH/H039376/1).

searching Irish tradition. Frequently, these categories contain quite long narratives. Recently, however, greater attention has been paid to the study of the shorter items which include memorates and contemporary legends (Tangherlini 1990; Bennett, Smith 1993).

The popularity of the fairy legend, the contemporary legend, and the memorate in folk tradition is probably due to their inherent deep cognitive structures. All three categories give rise to affectively engaged states of mind. Fairy legend brings this aspect to life through the medium of appealing to extreme, liminal metaphors and images associated with Otherworld archetypal figures and forces. Contemporary legend expresses subconscious fears and anxieties, existing within certain social groups and urbanised locations. Memorates operate on a scale relative to the concepts of fabulation and empirical truth (Honko 1964).

The narrator and his/her audience believe in the truth of the accounts contained in the memorates which belong to the domain of religious numinosity and ethical order, often combined. The efficacy of memorates also depends on the narrator's capacity to fit his/her own extraordinary experience into a contemporary context, enriching the story with both traditional and newly invented metaphors.

#### **AT F230 Marvels: Appearance of fairies as portents of drowning/ storm**

Let us now look at various examples of AT F230 motif 'Marvels: Appearance of fairies' among maritime memorates in which various portents to do with sea, weather forecast and the outcome of fishing are contained.

Appearance of supernatural beings out of the sea was considered to be an omen of storm by the fishermen:

They were not long there when a strange man came up out of the water and spoke to them. He asked them if they saw any pigs along the sea, because his pigs went away from him and that he wanted to bring them home because he was afraid it would make a very bad night. The fishermen told him they did not see any pigs at all, but they saw a lot of porpoises. The man said that those was his pigs. He asked the fisherman for a smoke of tobacco because he forgot to bring his own pipe with him. A fisherman gave him a quarter of tobacco, but the man of the sea wouldn't take all of that but instead he took a pipe full and put it in his pipe and had a smoke for himself. When he finished smoking he said that he should be going away now because it was going to be a very big storm soon (NFC 744. 473–5, recorded in co. Kerry, Annascoul, by P. Ó Suilleabháin from local fishermen).

This example is not, strictly speaking, a memorate in so far as the story

comes second-hand through the medium of the collector writing about the fishermen in the third person plural. It is however, quite significant in so far as the information was a first-hand account and received straight from the informant (Ir. *o bhéal go béal*). The fishermen encounter ‘a strange man’, looking for his ‘pigs’ that turn out to be ‘porpoises’, engages in conversation and even gets a smoke of tobacco. Notice, however, that the man does not accept a generous offering of ‘a quarter of tobacco’, but took whatever was sufficient for that particular moment – ‘a pipe full’ – and being satisfied, informed the fishermen of the coming disaster, indirectly referring to it. This characteristic of the story that the creature from the sea, ultimately symbolising the sea itself, was satisfied with whatever was sufficient can be connected with the widespread belief among Modern Irish (and also Scottish Gaelic) fishermen – ‘the sea must get its own’ (Ir. *caithfidh an fharraige a cuid féin a fháil*, lit. ‘the sea must get its own share’).<sup>2</sup> Although the latter is primarily concerned with drowning incidents and the prohibition to save the fishermen from drowning, in our story, the offering of tobacco is the ‘share’ that the sea, metonymically represented by the ‘strange man’, ‘gets’ from the fishermen who are consequently informed about the storm, escape it and ultimately do not drown. In this incident, they all come home safe by giving a share of tobacco to a strange man: they provided a substitute for themselves, and released themselves from the power of the sea to have them drowned. In other incidents, if the fishermen do not show enough respect to the sea creatures, and abuse the sea resources by overexploiting them, they can get drowned very easily. The following story, collected from Seán Ó Cuinnigéain by Seán Ó hEochaidh between 1935–55, comes from the *Fairy Legends from Donegal* publication:

There was a boat crew from Teelin fishing for salmon one summer... This afternoon they put out the net at Muckros Head. When they had been for a while bending over the net they saw something about the size of a seal near the estuary of the river. They backed the boat in and when they came near enough they saw it was a man standing waist-high in the sea. They were frightened... all but one man amongst them who said they should go for the net and take it in, that what they saw was a fairy man who would not meddle with them. They did with great care, and the fairy man did not meddle with them, although he was no sooner at one side of the boat than they would see

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<sup>2</sup> This is also discussed by Mac Carthaigh (1999:172) who claims that ‘the phrase “the sea must have her own”... which, though well-worn, is an accurate reflection of the mindset of the fishermen. The phrase implies a resigned, almost fatalistic, attitude to the sea. This is hardly surprising, since fishing is one of the most dangerous professions, one likely to generate a potent mixture of fear and respect for the sea’.

him on the other. They lifted the last of the net into the boat and they had made a good haul of salmon. They got home without mishap... The same crew boat went fishing for herring at Samhain time and the man who had given them courage the night they saw the fairy man was lost; the sail swept him into the sea and he was drowned (Ó hEochaidh, Ní Néill & Ó Catháin 1977:201, 203).

In the latter, it is clear that there is a distinction between the bold fisherman who has no fear of the supernatural sea man, and the rest of the crew who are terrified and do not really want to interact with the 'fairy man'. The one who has no fear and respect to the sea man and who encourages fishing despite such portent is punished for this – and, as the outcome of this attitude, he is drowned. The fact that the fisher folk were supposed to be respectful towards the sea and its creatures and not over-exploiting in regard to its resources is very much part of the framework of the interrelationship established between the coastal communities and the natural order. The story 'The woman in the sea' from *Seán Ó Conaill's Book* is a vivid example that the sea (exhibited in a form of a fairy woman in the story that rises to its surface between the lines of the terrified fishermen) takes on revenge against those fishermen who take no heed of the warning given by fellow fishermen and goes on fishing despite such portents (Ó Duilearga 1981:277–8). As a further example of the vital necessity to respect every strange thing that one may encounter whilst at sea is shown by another example from the National Folklore Collection below:

When they pulled the line to the surface of the water, they noticed to their great surprise that it was a lovely looking child that was tangled in the hook. ... he had lovely rosy cheeks, and he was laughing at them, the old man that was in the boat told them to be very careful with the child and to take the hook out of his clothes and to mind not to tear any part of his clothes. They put child back into the water again. The old man advised them not to delay any longer but to make their way as quick as they could and at that even they had not time to spare, when they just landed then a very big storm came on and if they were at sea all of them would be drowned (NFC 782.127).

This story was recorded in co. Kerry, at Keel, by a NFC collector P. Ó Suilleabháin from John Ashe, a fisherman, on 19 May 1941, who was eighty at the time, and referred that the incident took place roughly 50 years from the date of its collection. It is clear that the old man who is in the centre of the story exercised a lot of care and attention not to cause any anger or mischief in relation to the sea's child and advised that the child be returned to the sea safe and sound. Let us notice that all fishermen returned safely once they deposited

the supernatural child back into the sea intact and no one was drowned. In the story about the Teelin fishermen, on the contrary, the protagonist of the story did not take any special notice of the sign and was punished as a result of this. It is also to be noted that the supernatural child engaged in contact with the fishermen in a way appropriate for a child – laughing, whereas the ‘strange man’ of the first story engaged in a way appropriate for a male – by smoking a pipe of tobacco which he borrowed from the fishermen.

An extreme form of showing disrespect to the portents shown by the sea is mocking and making fun (Ir. *magadh*) of the members of the crew if they exhibit any fear to such things. A more extreme term that is used in the example below is *diabhlaíocht* ‘devilment, mischievousness, cursing (using the word ‘devil’)’ and would imply extremely negative connotations. The ones who would be given to mockery would expose themselves to mortal danger and, as a result, would be punished, and subsequently drowned:

A young crew from Teelin were fishing for herring one year. The oldest of them was no more than twenty-six. ... They got very few herring and they raised the sail to go home... The steersman was getting cold and he said to another of the crew: ‘Keep your hand on the tiller until I warm my hands’. There was a fire below in the front of the boat... He was not below ten minutes when there was a shout from the deck that a boat was coming down on them in full sail and that it looked like ramming them into the sea. The steerman came up and looked around and could see no boat at all... On their way to Killybegs the man who had seen the boat set about making a mock will. There was no man of the crew he did not leave some article of his clothing from his boot to his cap... Next night they went the same way... the poor man who had made the mock will the night before stumbled in some way and fell aboard and was drowned (Ó hEochaidh, Ní Néill & Ó Catháin 1977:213, 215).

Of course, the reference that the crew with whose member this incident occurred was ‘young’, hence inexperienced and not on the watch-out for supernatural omens, can be taken as a moralising factor: the presence of an old man among the members of the crew was deemed to be the necessary factor of its subsequent success or survival. Fishermen had to exercise extreme care when seeing such portents of phantom-boats, and the knowledge of the old fishermen could have been very handy in such cases.<sup>3</sup> Some portents or visions,

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<sup>3</sup> We shall not be looking at phantom-boats as the portents of storm in detail; I refer the interested reader to a study by Mac Cárthaigh (1999), in which he looks at such portents as ‘points of crisis’ of the members of a specific social group – of the



such as the one referred to below, could be of extreme and straightforward nature, and hence the message embedded in them could be understood without any difficulty:

THE HEADLESS GHOST. It was one Saturday night long ago when we were out fishing for salmon. There were four of us – three of us rowing, at that time, and one man at the rudder... So the man who was in control of the boat in the stern said: 'We'll take shelter in *An Poll Dorcha* for a while,' said he. That's *An Poll Dorcha* over behind *An Leac*, you know, under *An Strapa Ghorm* at *Barr na Spince*. That's where *An Poll Dorcha* is. So when we went in there a while a man lit his pipe. 'Well damn your souls,' said the man at the rudder, 'put out your oars and row for all your'e worth. Look what's in on the rock!' So I glanced round, anyway, and from that day to this, I think it was the headless ghost I saw. Even so – we shed some sweat before we landed at Portacloy beach. The man at the rudder said that he saw that he was looking at it a while and that it was a man with no head. Be that as it may, it was a hard earned evening by the time we reached the shore. Ever since then I have never gone out fishing for salmon on a Saturday night (Ó Catháin 1983:47).

The dreadful and shocking effect of such portent left no doubt to Seán Ó hEinrí, the informant, that they were doing something wrong. By abstaining from fishing on Saturday, as was the message, the fisherman was able to survive. A similar incident in terms of abstaining to practice fisherman's craft on a certain day of the week was recorded regarding fishing for salmon on Sunday:

THE FAIRY SALMON AND THE SUNDAY FISHERS. In the old days my grandfather and his crew were fishing for salmon in a place called Gobán an Uisce which is to the west below Slieve League about half-way between Teelin and Malinbeg, a very gentle place indeed. It was a Sunday morning and they had half the net out in a semi-circle since two or three o'clock. When they thought it was Mass time they said they should say the Rosary. They had hardly begun when a salmon went into the net... When they had the net by the lugs the third time one of the crew said they would catch it this time unless it was the red devil himself! The word was not out of his mouth before a red salmon leaped from the sea out of the net and over the corks. This haul was empty also. When they saw that, they made for home as quickly as they could. The fairy salmon frightened them for they thought it was not a good thing that put it in their way on a Sunday morning (Ó hEo-

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fishermen – signifying their intrinsic link (and contact) with the supernatural and the world of the dead.

As we have just seen, it was no help while the fishermen were in the open sea to utter the prayers: the fairy salmon was playing its trick upon the people regardless of their efforts. In fact, the salmon got worse when one of the crew mentioned ‘the red devil’ and scared the fishermen by leaping over the corks. The red (Ir. *ruadhearg*) colour attributed to the salmon irrevocably brings into one’s mind (and identifies it with) the Irish otherworld creatures (Ir. *sí*) that are primarily (but not exclusively) described in Irish folklore in general as having red hair. It should be noted, that primarily, but not exclusively, the fairy folk in maritime memorates is malignant to humans. Because of such associations, the red was not favoured by the fishermen: red-headed creatures were not to be mentioned by fishermen whilst at sea.

18. It was not permitted [when fishing] to mention anything *rua* (brown-or red-haired). There was a malediction in regard to fishing – ‘[May there be] a fox on your hook!’ When I used to go fishing I remember when *Peaidí Rua* – a man who lived in Ventry parish – was mentioned that he was not called *Peaidí Rua* but *Peaidí Deaghdhathach* (‘the good coloured’).<sup>4</sup>

Returning to our story, it must be said that the fishermen clearly showed their intentions to keep up with the rest of the society by invoking prayers. Such prayers were to be recited during the Sunday mass where presumably the rest of the community was at the time of the described incident. And yet, they were unsuccessful. However, they had their ways of remedying such situations. In many instances, the fishermen would attempt to cure such apparitions by turning to a priest. The latter would perform a ritual to purify them from the side-effects of seeing (or hearing of) such portents. The following example is the perfect illustration of the AT motif D1273.0.2 ‘Magic spells mixed with Christian prayers’ that is employed here:

‘What cause have you,’ asked the priest, ‘to be afoot at this time of the day?’  
They told him what they had heard.  
‘Here is the man,’ said the skipper, ‘who heard it all.’  
‘Have you all the crew here?’ asked the priest.

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<sup>4</sup> Trans. from An Seabhac (1928:139). We can refer to a memorate ‘The Red-haired Woman’, in which the informant tells of his unsuccessful fishing when he saw such a woman; once she disappeared, he ‘began to kill again until I had killed a good lot of pollock’ (Ó Duilearga 1981:282). Cp. a Scottish Gaelic proverb ‘[May there be] a red head on all the [fish] out [in the sea] (= may all the fish have the ill luck to be caught by us’ (Nicolson 1882:77).

‘I have them all,’ said the captain, ‘except one man and he mocked us when we told him about it. He would not come with us on any account.’

‘Well,’ said the priest, ‘he is the one most wanted of all. Can any man here ride a horse?’

‘Yes’...

He rode off and he brought the man back with him. The priest made them all kneel and he read for a long time over them. When the reading was finished... he said to the servant girl to bring in three bits of stick. The girl brought in the sticks. He burned them in the fire and then ground them up through the *office*.<sup>5</sup>

‘Now,’ said the priest to the skipper, ‘take that and shake it through the boat and in the sea about the boat. Moreover, there is one thing you must never do and that is to lead the fleet going out to sea...’

They followed the priest’s advice, and they spent their life coming and going on the sea and always fishing together, and never did they see or hear anything strange (Ó hEochaidh & MacNeill 1977:198–201).

As we have seen, there has been a whole inventory of supernatural sea apparitions and symbolic forms that included a man, a woman, a child, a ship, a headless ghost, and a red salmon. The fishermen were supposed to be able to ‘read’ such portents in order to escape a disaster. Were there any other ways to escape drowning? Indeed, there were: let us invoke a selection of fishermen’s taboos that were randomly collected throughout Rathlin island, co. Antrim:

No boat to make a turn against the sun.<sup>6</sup>

Never to go without a boat completely empty: one should always have some loose change in coins in one’s pocket.

Never to have a white stone in the ballast of the boat.<sup>7</sup>

Never to whistle aboard a boat: such could rise a wind.

Throw a coin into the sea, or holy water, to calm a sea; also sparks of a lighted coal or lighted turf if available.

Coin of the realm to be hammered and concealed in the bow of new boat

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<sup>5</sup> ‘The blessing of salt for certain purposes was known as an *office*’ (Ó hEochaidh, Ní Neill & Ó Catháin 1977:201, n. 1).

<sup>6</sup> Cp. a similar custom from Dingle, Co. Kerry, recorded by An Seabhac (1928:139, §17): ‘In the case of a boat going fishing, the skipper would always like to turn the boat about with the sun – to the right’.

<sup>7</sup> The white stones were associated with the fairies. Cf. the Donegal belief recorded by Ó hEochaidh, Ní Neill & Ó Catháin (1977:100): ‘It is said there were never white quartz stones anywhere but a place where the hill-folk had a dwelling. They are fairy stones by right and it is not good to have anything to do with them’.

(Murphy 1987:68).

The power of the Christian tradition had an important effect on such escape. Other than the powers of a sacred person, the priest, mentioned above, that were invoked to destroy the spells of the fairies cast over the fishermen and restore their safety at sea, there was a strong connection between sacred objects of both canonical Christian (e.g. holy water and churches) and folk religious provenance (holy wells and sacred stones) and various accidents at sea. According to an account collected by S. P. Ó Píotáin, a person will never be drowned who goes thrice through a window in St. Arabella's Chapel in Blackrod, co. Mayo (NFC 117. 94).

On the contrary, turning the Saints' Stone (Ir. *Leac na Naomh*) on Caher Island (Ir. *Oileán na Cathrach*), co. Mayo, was believed to cause storms (O'Donovan 1838:243–5). And yet, if the Well of the Fair Winds (Ir. *Tobar na Glórach*) at Teelin, co. Donegal, was to be cleaned out it would bring about favourable winds for storm stayed boats at Sligo, Balina or Belmullet, but there was a danger that a member of the family that cleaned the well would die (Ó Muirgheasa 1936:149).<sup>8</sup> It was also believed that the fishermen sailing out from Teelin Bay to fish in the open sea lower their sails by way of salute on passing the well. An identical custom was registered in relation to The Well of the Holy Women (Ir. *Tobar na mBan Naomh*) whereas the fishermen would salute it on passing, take off their caps and ask the help and blessing of the holy women. E. Ó Muirgheasa reports that a similar salutation was performed by the fishermen on the north-west coast of county Mayo, 'who, passing under a jutting cliff known as the Cailleach Crom, salute it bareheaded three times in occult terms, at the same time striking the water with the flat of their oars' (Ó Muirgheasa 1936:149).

### Conclusion

Within the scope of this short contribution, we have dealt with a number of motifs. Having defined the concepts of memorate and contemporary legend within the context of the Gaelic (both Irish and Scottish) maritime tradition, we have looked at appearances of various supernatural beings and objects from the sea (both animate and inanimate) that were indicators of the imminent drowning or storms. Such supernatural creatures included friendly males and repellent females, laughing children and jumping salmon, headless ghosts

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<sup>8</sup> On the Scottish comparanda, see Mackinlay (1893: Chap. 13, 'Weather and wells').

and phantom-boats. The fishermen who were serious about such apparitions, were able to escape the storms or drowning that awaited all those who had no respect for the sea and its creatures. These legends tie together the sea, as both the garden to be cultivated<sup>9</sup> and the element to be afraid of, and the fishermen, engaged both in its cultivation and veneration, into a close-knit unit of a Northern maritime tradition at the periphery of Europe.

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<sup>9</sup> The following appellations for the sea have been recorded throughout Ireland: *Garraí Phaddy Lally* 'Paddy Lally's Garden' (Co. Mayo), *Gáirdín na Maighdine Muire* 'The Virgin Mary's Garden' and *Garraí an iascaire* 'The fisherman's garden' (Co. Clare), *Gáirdín an iascaire* and *Gáirdín cailm* (Co. Galway).